

*Printed for the War Cabinet. December 1939.*SECRET.

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W.M. (39)

103rd Conclusions.

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WAR CABINET 103 (39).

CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Monday, December 4, 1939, at 11.30 A.M.

Present :

The Right Hon. NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN, M.P., Prime Minister (<i>in the Chair</i>).	
The Right Hon. VISCOUNT HALIFAX, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.	Admiral of the Fleet the Right Hon. LORD CHATFIELD, Minister for Co- ordination of Defence.
The Right Hon. WINSTON S. CHURCHILL, M.P., First Lord of the Admiralty.	The Right Hon. L. HORE-BELISHA, M.P., Secretary of State for War.
The Right Hon. Sir KINGSLEY WOOD, M.P., Secretary of State for Air.	The Right Hon. Sir SAMUEL HOARE, Bt., M.P., Lord Privy Seal.
The Right Hon. LORD HANKEY, Minister without Portfolio.	

The following were also present :

The Right Hon. Sir JOHN ANDERSON, M.P., Secretary of State for the Home Department and Minister of Home Security.	The Right Hon. ANTHONY EDEN, M.P., Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs (<i>Items 1-14</i>).
The Right Hon. HERWALD RAMS- BOTHAM, M.P., First Commissioner of Works (<i>Items 14 and 15</i>).	Sir HORACE J. WILSON, Permanent Secretary to the Treasury.
Air Chief Marshal Sir CYRIL L. N. NEWALL, Chief of the Air Staff (<i>Items 1-15</i>).	General Sir W. EDMUND IRONSIDE, Chief of the Imperial General Staff (<i>Items 1-15</i>).

Secretariat.

Sir EDWARD BRIDGES.
Major-General H. L. ISMAY.
Mr. F. HEMMING.
Lieutenant-Colonel V. DYKES, R.E.
Wing Commander W. ELLIOT.
Mr. A. BEVIR.
Mr. L. F. BURGIS.

WAR CABINET 103 (39).

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The Air Situation.

(Previous
Reference:
W.M. (39) 102nd
Conclusions,
Minute 1.)

1. *The Secretary of State for Air* gave the War Cabinet further details of the attack carried out by 24 Wellingtons on German warships at Heligoland on the 3rd December. There had been 2 cruisers and 6 to 9 destroyers in the roads at the time. Two or three direct hits had probably been made on one of the cruisers, and one destroyer had been closely straddled by one stick of bombs. Owing to cloud, however, the damage could not be confirmed by photographs taken at the time. A bomb dropped by an aircraft making a steep turn had fallen on an anti-aircraft battery, which had been silenced. Our aircraft had been followed up by 7 or 8 Messerschmidts, but only one of the enemy fighters had pressed home its attack, and this aircraft had been shot down. The anti-aircraft fire from the batteries on Heligoland had been heavy and accurate. Two of our aircraft had been hit, but had not sustained vital damage and all had returned home safely. It seemed clear that the German warning system was inefficient, since before reaching Heligoland our aircraft had reconnoitred Wilhelmshaven. It was also interesting that the German fighters had not pressed home their attacks against our Wellingtons, which seemed more than a match for them.

Three Wellingtons had carried out a sweep of the area off Terschelling and Sylt, but without sighting any targets.

In the attack made on a U-boat off Texel, reported the previous day, a direct hit had been scored on the base of the conning-tower. The U-boat was believed to be one of the large ocean-going type.

A patrol off Texel on the 3rd December had had a brush with enemy aircraft, but no casualties had been sustained on either side.

A search had been carried out south of Iceland, in consequence of possible indications of enemy vessels in that area, but nothing had been seen.

A reconnaissance had been made by the Royal Air Force contingent of the Field Force to investigate the presence of pontoon bridges over the Rhine and to observe road and rail movement.

On the night of the 2nd/3rd December leaflets had been dropped by balloons, and it was believed that they might have penetrated as far as Brno.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

The Naval Situation.

(Previous
Reference:
W.M. (39) 102nd
Conclusions,
Minute 2.)
H.M.S. *Nelson*.

2. *The First Lord of the Admiralty* informed the War Cabinet that H.M.S. *Nelson* had sustained damage from a mine while entering a harbour on the West Coast of Scotland. It was thought that the damage had probably been caused by a magnetic mine, in 19 fathoms. It was believed that thirty of the crew had been injured, but that no one had been killed. Some of the ship's compartments had been flooded. The full extent of the damage had not yet been ascertained, but it would be necessary for the vessel to go into dock for repairs. In the meantime there was some danger that an air attack might be launched on H.M.S. *Nelson* if the Germans received information of the explosion from the submarine which had laid the mine. There were no anti-aircraft defences in the harbour at present, but the Air Ministry were being asked to provide special protection, and the Admiralty would transfer some of their anti-aircraft defences from the Thames to deal with the situation. The First Lord proceeded to give details of the redispotion of our heavy ships which would be necessitated by the damage to the *Nelson*.

Towards the end of the Meeting the First Lord said that he proposed that the *Nelson* should remain where she was for some days. He thought that for the time being it would be necessary that, when our Capital Ships were entering ports, they should be preceded by large merchant ships.

The *Admiral Scheer* had now appeared off the South-West coast of Africa. There were strong forces at the Cape which had been sent to search for the raider, but if she went out into the

Reprisals for
Inhumane
Methods of
Submarine
Warfare.
(Previous
Reference:
W.M. (39) 92nd
Conclusions,
Minute 3.)

unfrequented areas of the Southern Atlantic it might be very difficult to pick her up.

The patrol of the South African Air Force which had spotted the German liner *Watussi* was an improvised formation of shore-based aircraft. It appeared that these aircraft had not received the instructions issued to His Majesty's ships for the action to be taken to prevent the scuttling of German ships by their crews.

The Prime Minister expressed the view that the scuttling of German ships by their crews was quite indefensible at a time when we were very short of shipping and the Germans were sinking our ships without warning. We could not afford to be quixotic in this matter, and it might be necessary for us to take more drastic action.

The First Lord of the Admiralty undertook to reinforce the instructions which had already been issued by the Admiralty on this question.

Proceeding, the First Lord reported that an attack had been made on a U-boat off St. Catherine's, but without result.

The submarine *Triad* had safely arrived in harbour.

S.S. *Chancellor* had been severely damaged in a collision off Halifax. S.S. *Hamsterley* had been sunk in collision in convoy off Great Yarmouth.

Magnetic mines.
(Previous
Reference:
W.M. (39) 102nd
Conclusions,
Minute 2.)

Satisfactory progress was being made with investigations into the methods of dealing with the magnetic mine. The magnetic ship which had been developed before the outbreak of war appeared to be the most promising, but several other methods were being tried. A mine had been successfully exploded by a towed lighter containing a magnetic coil.

Movement of shipping into and out of the Port of London was proceeding normally. The number of ships in the Downs had been greatly reduced.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

A.A. Defence of
the Tyne.

3. *The First Lord of the Admiralty* said that he had been disturbed on his recent visit to the Tyne at the position in regard to defence against low-flying air attack. He suggested that 20-mm. Hispano-Suiza aircraft cannon, which were at present being produced more quickly than they could be used in aircraft, should be temporarily employed for this purpose.

The Chief of the Air Staff said that arrangements had already been made to use these temporarily surplus guns on land pedestals for anti-aircraft purposes. The allocation of these defences to the various vital points in the country was the task of the Deputy Chiefs of Staff Committee, who were advised by a technical Sub-Committee.

The First Lord of the Admiralty also enquired whether it was necessary for the balloons to be kept in the air except when warning of an attack was given.

The Secretary of State for Air explained that experience had shown that more damage was sustained by balloons on the ground in rough weather than when they were flying. The output of balloons was being accelerated.

The War Cabinet agreed :—

- (i) To instruct the Deputy Chiefs of Staff Committee to consider what defences against low-flying attack could forthwith be provided for the Tyne, having regard to :—
 - (a) the importance of this area in comparison with other important localities;
 - (b) the possibility of using Hispano-Suiza guns in the manner suggested in the above discussion.
- (ii) To report to the Military Co-ordination Committee by 12 noon on Wednesday, the 6th December, 1939.

Military Operations.

(Previous
Reference:
W.M. (39) 101st
Conclusions,
Minute 4.)

4. *The Secretary of State for War* said that there was an increase of two in the number of Divisions directly opposite Holland. There was one more Division in the extreme South. Against this, one Division had been withdrawn from the Frankfurt area, and another from Trier.

In reply to the Prime Minister, who asked as to the significance of these movements, *the Chief of the Imperial General Staff* said that the German troops were still in a position close up to the frontier, and that, from this point of view, were ready for an attack at any moment. On the other hand, the state of the ground on the Western Front was appalling. Part of the line was completely inundated and could not be traversed by tanks. For these reasons he regarded an imminent attack as impossible.

The Secretary of State for War mentioned that arrangements had been made whereby British formations would take their turn in the sector of the line on the Franco-German frontier.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

Weekly Reports.

(Previous
Reference:
W.M. (39) 96th
Conclusions,
Minute 5.)

5. The War Cabinet took note of Weekly *Résumé* No. 13 by the Chiefs of Staff (W.P. (39) 145).

Finland.

Invasion by
Soviet Union.
(Previous
Reference:
W.M. (39) 102nd
Conclusions,
Minute 4.)

6. *The Secretary of State for War* said that the Soviet had claimed further slight advances in the Karelian Isthmus, but it would appear that they had not yet reached the Finnish main defensive line. Reports indicated that these advances had cost the Russians heavy losses. The Finns appeared to be still in possession of Petsamo. One Soviet report mentioned the launching of a new movement against Suolussalmi. This was the point on Finland's Eastern frontier, where that country was narrowest; but it was also the point where the Russians would be furthest from the Murmansk railway line.

The War Cabinet took note of this statement.

Finland.

Proposed supply
of Fighter
Aircraft.

7. *The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs* said that the Finnish Minister, who had visited him the previous day, thought that the Finns would give a fair account of themselves on the ground. The majority of their Air Force, however, was absorbed in support of the Army and the defence of such vulnerable points as power stations. They had, therefore, no fighter defence for the civil population. The Finnish Minister had given a tragic account of the way in which Russian aircraft had, unmolested, been free to machine-gun the civil population. It was clear that the Russians were out to Bolshevise the whole of Finland, and, if they succeeded in the conquest of that country, he (the Foreign Secretary) had little doubt that they would ultimately endeavour to edge round and seize the Northern ports of Norway. In these circumstances, the Finnish Minister had asked whether, as an immediate measure of help, we could supply his country with 30 fighters. The suggestion was that, although we could not supply Spitfires or Hurricanes, we might be able to spare Gladiators, which would be collected in this country and flown to Finland by Finn pilots. (Some doubt was expressed as to whether this was practicable.) From the political point of view, the Foreign Secretary considered that it would be to our interest to try to give the Finns this measure of help. Whilst it was to our advantage that Russia should be causing embarrassment to Germany, we must, at the same time, realise that

the Russian invasion of Finland might, in time, prove very embarrassing to ourselves, particularly through its repercussions on the Scandinavian countries. He had examined the question of meeting Finland's request for fighters from the neutrality point of view, and this need not present difficulty. The real difficulty, therefore, was whether the aircraft could be spared from this country, and on this point he had been in touch with the Secretary of State for Air. He urged that, if we were unable to give them the full number, we should at least endeavour to let them have a proportion—say, twenty fighters.

The Secretary of State for Air said that the air defence of this country was becoming an increasing burden which made it almost impossible to meet outside demands of this nature.

The Chief of the Air Staff said that the demand for fighters to defend not only this country, but also France, was growing heavier day by day—for the protection, for example, of the Navy; of Liverpool, and of the Tyneside, as suggested by the First Lord that morning. We had been obliged to refuse the demands of Turkey. On military grounds, he did not think that we ought to release any further fighter aircraft at this juncture.

The Prime Minister said that he was inclined to support the view of the Foreign Secretary that every effort should be made to give the Finns at least a measure of support. The political effect of such a gesture might be very considerable, particularly on the Swedes, to whom we looked for shipping and iron ore. Turkey was not at war, but the Finns were. To give the latter such help as we could would conform with the policy of throwing in our resources in places where they would be of most value.

The Secretary of State for War felt that a Russian occupation of Finland would bring the Soviet menace dangerously close to us; and that therefore anything which we could do to hold up the Russian advance would be of great importance. It was particularly desirable that the Swedes should not be thrown into the arms of Germany. Help to Finland might produce a good moral effect on the United States. Failing British aircraft, would it be possible to supply the Finns with Italian machines?

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs said that he understood that the Finnish Government were enquiring into this possibility.

After further discussion, the War Cabinet agreed:—

- (i) That the Secretary of State for Air should consider further the Finnish Government's request for the supply of fighter aircraft, and should report thereon to the War Cabinet next day.
- (ii) That the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs should inform the Finnish Minister that the request for British fighter aircraft was being considered sympathetically, but that this request presented us with great difficulties.

League of Nations.

Forthcoming Meeting of the Council and Assembly.

(Previous

Reference:

W.M. (39) 92nd

Conclusions,

Minute 9.)

8. *The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs* said that upon the application of the Finnish representative, the Secretary-General of the League had called a meeting of the Council of the League for the following Saturday (9th December, 1939) in order to consider the situation arising out of the aggression by the U.S.S.R. upon Finland. So far as could be seen, M. Maisky would be the Chairman. The Meeting of the Assembly would take place on Monday. His (the Secretary of State's) opinion was that it was unfortunate that these meetings should take place, since they could not produce any useful result, and would still further damage the League. He did not propose to go to Geneva himself, but he thought that Mr. R. A. Butler, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, should represent this country. The line to be taken

should be concerted with the French Government. He considered that, if any proposal were made for the imposition of sanctions against the U.S.S.R., this should be resisted not only because it was futile but also because of the bad effect which it would create in Italy. He would propose that, if this subject were raised, Mr. Butler should state plainly that we considered that this was a case which could only be met by force of moral opinion.

The War Cabinet expressed general approval of this statement.

Turkey.

British obligations under the Anglo-Turkish Treaty.
(Previous Reference:
W.M. (39) 66th
Conclusions,
Minute 10.)

9. *The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs* said that arising out of the communication which, at the request of the War Cabinet, the First Lord of the Admiralty had made to General Orbay, the Turkish Government had asked for an assurance that that statement was not intended to whittle down our obligations under the Anglo-Turkish Treaty to assist Turkey in the event of her being attacked by a European Power. He proposed in answer to explain that the action indicated by the First Lord was that which we proposed to take in the event of Turkey being threatened. It did not refer to the action which we should take in the event of Turkey being engaged in actual hostilities, in which case we should carry out to the full our obligations under the Treaty.

The First Lord of the Admiralty agreed. The action which he had indicated to General Orbay that we were prepared to take in certain circumstances was additional to, and not in substitution for, the action to be taken by us under the Treaty.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statements.

Italy.

Attitude towards U.S.S.R. aggression on Finland.

10. *The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs* drew attention to telegram No. 1195 (R.) dated the 3rd December, 1939, from His Majesty's Ambassador, Rome, in which Sir Percy Loraine reported that organised pro-Finnish and anti-Soviet demonstrations by students had taken place the previous day in Rome, and must be assumed to have had official approval. No mention of this incident had so far appeared in the Italian Press.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

Italy.

Anxiety over British Contraband Control.
(Previous Reference:
W.M. (39) 94th
Conclusions,
Minute 10.)

11. *The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs* said that the further recent telegrams received from His Majesty's Ambassador, Rome, on the subject of our Contraband Control measures (and in particular Sir Percy Loraine's telegram No. 1191, dated the 1st December, 1939) were causing him considerable anxiety. He was in consultation with the Minister for Economic Warfare on the subject, and he did not wish at the moment to ask for any decision from the War Cabinet.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

U.S.S.R.

Attitude of British Press towards the Soviet Government.

12. *The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs* reminded the War Cabinet that hitherto we had been somewhat secretive regarding our negotiations the previous summer with the U.S.S.R. He had, however, the previous day been asked whether it would be possible to permit further statements on this subject to appear in the Press. In view of the U.S.S.R. aggression on Finland he had thought it wise to permit this within moderate limits, since this would strengthen our position in the Scandinavian countries. On the other hand it would not, he thought, be wise for the Press

to adopt too violent an attitude towards the U.S.S.R. On the whole he thought that the Press that morning had taken a satisfactory attitude.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

The Far Eastern Situation.

The Tientsin silver question, and proposals for settling the Tientsin incident.

(Previous Reference: W.M. (39) 97th Conclusions, Minute 12.)

13. *The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs* drew attention to telegram No. 1582 from His Majesty's Ambassador, Tokyo, reporting that it was clear that the Japanese Government were anxious to close the Tientsin incident as quickly as possible. A great struggle was taking place behind the scenes between the advocates of a rapprochement with respectively the Democracies and the U.S.S.R. Sir Robert Craigie's own view had all along been that there was no time to be lost in settling the Tientsin question, and he thought that there was much to be said for the suggestion that the silver should be placed under the joint control of, if not actually deposited jointly with, the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation and the Yokohama Specie Bank. Sir Robert Craigie considered that if we were to insist, we could now secure Japanese assent to the deposit of the silver in a neutral bank, but he felt that it would be good, politically, to meet the Japanese to the extent of accepting joint control of the silver placed in some neutrally owned safe deposit.

He (the Secretary of State) considered that what was important was that we should satisfy ourselves that, wherever the silver was deposited, it could not be withdrawn by the Japanese without our approval. If we could secure this, he favoured giving Sir Robert Craigie some latitude in order to enable him to reach a definite agreement. Japanese feeling had been affected by the action of the U.S.S.R. against Finland, and we should be wise to take this opportunity of settling the Tientsin question. He would be glad to have the authority of the War Cabinet to telegraph as soon as possible to Sir Robert Craigie on the lines which he had indicated.

The War Cabinet—

Authorised the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to despatch a telegram to Sir Robert Craigie authorising him to reach a settlement of the Tientsin question on the lines indicated.

Evacuation of Government Departments.

(Previous Reference: W.M. (39) 6th Conclusions, Minute 2.)

14. The War Cabinet had before them a Report on the Evacuation of Government Departments (W.P. (G.) (39) 124) by the Civil Defence Committee.

The Home Secretary and the Minister of Home Security stated that the Government Staffs to be evacuated had been divided into two categories: (1) the "A" or the more essential staff, *i.e.*, those concerned with war duties, which amounted to some 22,000 and must be moved as a body (this was called the Black Move); (2) the "B" or less essential staffs, amounting to some 42,000, which would be evacuated under the Yellow Move. The Committee recommended that this latter move, only half of which had been carried out, should be proceeded with on the ground that if later the Black Move had to be carried out, the difficulties of this Move would thereby be greatly lessened.

The Committee considered that the Black Move should take place only at the last possible moment and in face of absolute necessity, owing to the great loss of efficiency that would result.

The Committee had considered alternatives to the Black Move, such as concentrating the Government Departments transferred from London in one suitable headquarters town, but were satisfied that this was impracticable. They had also considered transferring

some of the Departments to the North-Western suburbs of London, as was contemplated in the September crisis of 1938, and were of the opinion that this plan might be re-examined by the Air Staff.

The Home Secretary reminded the War Cabinet that the agitation against what had already been done by the Government in the way of requisitioning still continued, and the claims for relief by hotel keepers and the boroughs concerned was becoming more insistent.

The Secretary of State for Air said that the Air Ministry held that, if the situation was so desperate that the work of government could not continue in Central London, then the position in the North-West suburbs would be almost as bad, and little would be gained by making a move to that area. He also drew attention to the fact that Mr. Garvin, in an article in *The Observer* on the previous day, had said that the air threat to this country still continued, and that Germany might have the question in suspense in a way that admitted no abatement of our vigilance and discipline.

The Prime Minister said that in view of previous discussions of the War Cabinet, the Civil Defence Committee were bound to reach the conclusions set out in their Report, which struck him as a very thorough document. There was no doubt, however, that the Black Move would result in a great loss of efficiency, and he thought that the need of such a move was growing less and less. It was clear that Germany was anxious to avoid starting an attack of the kind that would mean retaliation on her cities. He did not think that the time had come to repeal the previous decision of the War Cabinet, but there was no doubt that the emphasis had been changed since they had first considered this question. As for the Yellow Move, if it meant great loss of efficiency and hardship to Civil Servants, he thought that the necessity of proceeding further with it might be reconsidered.

The First Commissioner of Works hoped the Yellow Move would be proceeded with. The accommodation question for Government Departments in London was still an acute problem and, although 18,000 Civil Servants had been evacuated, he had already had to find office accommodation for 16,000 Civil Servants for new or expanding Departments, and accommodation for another 6,000 had been asked for. In addition, so long as it was impossible to hand back the hotels which had been requisitioned, the influx of Civil Servants to the towns affected was regarded as alleviating the position to a very considerable extent. Indications had been given that further Civil Staffs were to be evacuated, and it would become very difficult to hold the position if any indication was given that these orders were being countermanded.

Reference was also made to the desirability on general grounds of some of the less essential Civil Staffs, which had previously been located in London, being located in the provinces.

The Prime Minister said that what he had in mind was that further evacuation under the Yellow Move should not take place merely on the ground that such evacuation was a necessary preliminary to the Black Move. To the extent that evacuation of Staffs was based on other considerations, that was a different matter.

The Home Secretary said that he proposed to institute a thorough review of the whole position towards the end of the calendar year.

The War Cabinet—

Approved the recommendations of the Civil Defence Committee, subject to Conclusion (a) being amended to read as follows:—

“That, in view of the decision of the War Cabinet that a start should be made on the evacuation from

London of the staffs comprised in the 'Yellow' move, further gradual transfers in that Move should be conducted as and when practicable, it being understood that each Departmental Minister concerned should determine what portions of the Staff of his Department could be transferred from London without serious loss in efficiency."

**Air Raid
Protection for
Evacuated
Government
Staffs.**

15. The War Cabinet had before them a Report by the Civil Defence Committee (W.P. (G.) (39) 88), covering a Memorandum by the First Commissioner of Works containing specific proposals for air raid protection for evacuated Government Staffs (C.D.C. (39) 21).

After the *Home Secretary* had explained the main points in the Report, the *Chief of the Air Staff* said that the Chiefs of Staff raised no objection to the provision of accommodation on the scale recommended.

The War Cabinet agreed—

That approval should be given to the proposals for air raid protection for evacuated Government staffs set out in a Memorandum by the First Commissioner of Works (C.D.C. (39) 21) enclosed in the Report of the Civil Defence Committee (W.P. (G.) (39) 88), subject to the following qualifications:—

- (a) that, in implementing the policy, the First Commissioner of Works should give instructions that action should be taken unobtrusively, and that due regard should be paid to local air raid protection standards; and
- (b) that, in order to secure reasonable conformity with local practice, the First Commissioner of Works should arrange with the Minister of Home Security for close consultation between their respective Departments.

**Unemployment
Assistance
Board.**

Proposed
Increase
in Scales of
Payment.

16. The War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum by the Minister of Labour (W.P. (G.) (39) 130) explaining that it was proposed to make Draft Regulations to give effect to certain proposals submitted by the Unemployment Assistance Board for increases in the scales of payment. These increases amounted to 1s. in the weekly rate for each person of the age of 16 or over, and of 6d. in the rate for each person under 16.

It was explained that these proposals had been fully discussed by the Departments concerned and the Ministerial Committee on Economic Policy, and that the view had been reached that they should be accepted.

The War Cabinet:—

Approved the action proposed in the Minister of Labour's Memorandum.

*Richmond Terrace, S.W. 1,
December 4, 1939.*